Exclusive: Howard Hunt talks from jail

'I'LL DIE IF THEY KEEP ME CAGED'

Star interview by Steve Dunleavy

WATERGATE conspirator E. Howard Hunt broke his silence this week in a sensational jail-house interview with The Star.

In it, the man who helped change the course of American history claimed he was rotting behind bars because of a Kennedy clan vendetta which has even tried to involve him in President Kennedy's assassination.

He said it started as far back as the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, which Hunt helped plan, and climaxed 11 years later when a jail door was slammed behind him for his part in the Watergate conspiracy.

Hunt talked for three hours about his bitterness toward Kennedy cronies and the Watergate figures who betrayed him.

And he claimed that if he was not freed when his parole came up in January, he would finally crack — and die.

Today, the once-proud super patriot who was a crack intelligence officer for 26 years is a pale, haggard shell of bewilderment and bitterness.

"Some men in jail survive because of hope," he told me during the interview at a prison camp in Eglin Air Force base, Fla.

"But I have lost hope — it's bitterness that keeps me alive now. Somehow the bitterness keeps the adrenalin pumping and that keeps me alive.

"But if I'm not freed in January, if they keep me caged, I don't think I have the resilience to stay alive. I'm 58 now and the body won't take it."

Hunt and Gordon Liddy recruited the five men who were caught inside the Democratic Party campaign headquarters in the Watergate building. Hunt and Liddy were in a building across the road operating the break-in with walkie-talkies.

Hunt is particularly bitter at what he says are rumors that he was involved in the death of John Kennedy.

"There is that crazy story that there was a photograph taken of me in Dallas the day of the tragedy, which is disgusting nonsense," he said.

"The leftists who rally to the Kennedy flag don't want to believe that a leftist like Oswald slaughtered their idol.

"So they try to get the idea across that a madman of the right was the conspirator in the assassination.

'Kennedy vendetta keeps me in'

"No matter how ridiculous it sounds, things like that hurt me terribly and they hurt my children.

"But the liberals who surround the Kennedys recognize that I am an uncompromising foe of all that they believe in. I don't deny it.

"They also recognize that I am articulate, and no matter how much they try to discredit me, that angers them more. That is one of the reasons I am still rotting in jail.

"They derive a great deal of satisfaction out of my misery. They think they have got me at last. Why are Gordon Liddy and I still in jail while the other Watergate figures are making millions from their memoirs?

"The Justice Department is controlled by liberal zealots. Now that's a word usually reserved for the right wing. But the liberals are zealots.

"They all cling to the idea that we should give away as much of our country as possible, and these are the people that control the law of the land.

"When I first went before a Grand Jury, there they were—six Harvard law school educated prosecutors, Kennedy men each one of them.

"I have never hidden my criticism of Camelot. Kennedy doomed the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, and in so doing doomed much of Latin America.

"It was an awful, dreadful tragedy that ended his life, but I suspect that if President Kennedy had lived, the history books would have shown that he was one of the most inexperienced and inept Presidents we have ever had."

PHOTOS OF HUNT TAKEN IN JAIL BY MICHAEL BRENNAN

Hunt incurred the wrath of the Kennedys even more when he was dispatched to dig up additional information on Teddy Kennedy's true role in the Chappaquiddick tragedy.

Equipped with CIA-provided disguise, and a special voice altering device, Hunt interviewed a man in New England who was supposed to know more about Teddy Kennedy's involvement in Chappaquiddick than had been revealed.

Robert Bennett, the CIA man named as Deep Throat in The Star two weeks ago, came to Hunt and told him that Charles Colson, the White House aide, was "keen" for Hunt to interview the man.

"I did as I was ordered but actually got nothing useful from the man," Hunt admitted. "But the fact that the Kennedy clan thought we were on to something made them all the more uneasy."

'What I did I did for my country'

Today, as Hunt fills the long hours in jail with his new hobby of landscape painting, he is still proud of his reputation as a patriot and a loyalist. "I have tried to retain my dignity despite the vile accusations that have been levelled at me," he said.

"I have lost everything I hold dear. My wife was killed in a plane crash in 1972, acting as a courier for the Committee to Re-elect the President.

'I regret I didn't listen to my wife'

"That accident plays on my mind. My four children are motherless, and my youngest is 12. He has been without his mother since he was eight.

"What more do my enemies want to do to me? I don't deny my role as a conspirator. We were looking for files in the Watergate building that would have proved the Democrats were receiving financial aid from outside sources.

"I believe they were. I was acting from orders from John Mitchell, the highest law-maker in the land.

"Of course, when it was uncovered, everybody ran like rats. Colson, particularly, when he told me: "Howard, I don't want to even talk about it. I don't want to hear it."

Hunt is suspicious of Charles Colson.

"I find his sudden religious conversion very curious," he said. "I don't think Colson has changed one little bit, despite his claims that he has been born again.

"Then there is John Ehrlichman, another man who has made money from a book about the affair. Ehrlichman is a buffoon who has renounced all the values he lived by.

"He couldn't beat them, so he grew a beard and joined them.

"John Dean, the weak sister, acted completely true to form right from the very time he took $4,000 from funds to finance his honeymoon. Money that was meant for better men than he.

"I think in the case of Bob Haldeman, he has borne himself well. He seems to have emerged with some dignity."

And what of Richard Nixon?

"Nixon is a very tragic figure," he said. "From some of the things he has said in exile it is evident he is being calculatedly sheltered from the realities of life.

"This talk of him re-entering public life. He is being sheltered in a dream world the same way he was during Watergate.

"It was quite obvious that there was no real chance of a cover-up. Anybody could see a mile off that the likes of John Dean would crack to save their own skin. That's why I outrightly pleaded guilty.

"But Nixon, Mitchell and Colson rejected the first thing that an officer learns in wartime, and that is you take care of the troops first.

"Jesus, they talk about Hunt and Liddy being the masterminds of Watergate—hell, it was quite obvious it was Colson, Mitchell and Dean who were the masterminds. We were the troops.

"Now if that sounds like I'm trying to get out from under, or ducking my responsibility, I want to say this loud and clear.

"I am not ashamed of what I did. I did it. I pleaded guilty to conspiracy, but I believed, as did Liddy and the rest of us, that we were working under the color of the law.

"The only thing I regret is that I didn't learn more about the people behind it. I regret not using more thought in taking orders.

"I regret I didn't listen to my dear wife who said: 'Howard, I don't trust these people who are giving the orders.'

"She saw through them, and I wish to hell I had, and I wish to hell I had listened to her. She

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'My wife's death plays on my mind'

'I think of my four children'

'Traitors are going free while I'm still rotting in jail'

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became involved very reluctantly.

"She told me: 'You are not going to jail. I will do anything to keep you out of jail.' She was a wonderfully loyal and supportive woman."

Hunt discounts any hint that the plane crash that killed his wife was anything but a tragic accident.

"No, I don't believe there was anything of a conspiracy that caused the plane to crash," he said. "It was just a dreadful tragedy."

Hunt, who has been incarcerated now for a total of 26 months, was originally sentenced to 35 years in jail. His parole comes up in January, but if refused he could serve at least another 2½ years at Eglin.

Eglin has been called a country club jail. Its two tennis courts, track, gymnasium, hobby center and attractive barracks make it one of the most enlightened penitentiaries in the country.

But Hunt confines himself to his own personal jail.

He makes few friends — if any — with the exception of the prison authorities, who look on him as model prisoner who has no place in a jail.

To Hunt, the worst punishment is the stigma of a being a convict.

His bewilderment at his plight is understandable.

Here is a man who, from his first days in China as a member of the Secret Service in World War II, has laid his life on the line for his country on countless occasions.

His life in the early years of his service was strictly out of the pages of James Bond. He describes them as "the real shoot 'em Joe days."

Today he believes the CIA is a stagnant organization without the strong loyalists like himself and Gordon Liddy.

Liddy, the man who has remained completely silent on his role, is, according to Hunt, "acting true to form."

"He is a strong, very strong man of amazing resolve. A man I have to admire," said Hunt.

Hunt said too that "the Kennedy liberal types have just about emasculated the CIA. There is very little left.

"They feel that we shouldn't be too beastly to the Russians."

Hunt also gets angry at the mention of Daniel Ellsberg. Hunt organized the break-in to the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

"Here is a man who gave important security papers to a newspaperman," he said. "He was looking to do something destructive to our Government. Giving away secrets. Could you imagine what would have happened to him in another country?

"I did what I did for my country. He goes free, I rot in jail."

Hunt admits that revenge for what has happened to him is never far from his mind.

"Let's say I'm looking for satisfaction to be able to speak out freely and unfettered," he said.

"I don't deny that the things I will say will make some of the traitors of Watergate feel very uncomfortable . . . if and when I get out."

And if he doesn't get out of jail? "If I don't, I think it is accurate to say that you can ring down the curtain on E. Howard Hunt."

"If they keep me caged much longer, I will crack and die."

He then turned to one of his paintings called Encounters, and touched up his signature.

The signature is not "E. Howard Hunt" — it is a symbol.

The symbol is crossed cell bars.

HUNT FACING F.B.I. PROBE

THE FBI wants to interview Hunt over the murder of Mafia hoodlum Johnny Roselli.

"It's quite ridiculous," the Watergate conspirator told The Star from his prison cell.

"I never knew Roselli or any of his kind. I'll just have to tell them I knew nothing, absolutely nothing."

Roselli told Senate investigators that he and Chicago gangster Sam Giancana were recruited by the CIA to work out an assassination plot to kill Fidel Castro. Giancana was murdered two days before giving evidence at a Senate hearing.

"It's so typical," said Hunt, "they are determined not to leave me alone."